

## Excising the ‘Bridegroom of Blood’: a new approach to Zipporah’s *hatan*

*Philippe Guillaume*

On its way from Midian to Egypt, Moses’ family is attacked by YHWH. Zipporah wards off the attack by cutting off her son’s foreskin. She then touches his ‘foot’ declaring “You are a *hatan* of bloods for me” and “You are a *hatan* of bloods by circumcision.” (Exod 4:24–26)

In most modern translations, Moses takes centre stage. Moses is the victim of the attack, Zipporah touches his feet, she addresses him as *hatan*. Hence, the expression ‘*hatan dāmym*’ is traditionally rendered as ‘bridegroom of blood’:

<sup>24</sup>On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the Lord met him and tried to kill him. <sup>25</sup>But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin, and touched Moses’ feet with it, and said, “Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!” <sup>26</sup>So he let him alone. It was then she said, “A bridegroom of blood by circumcision.” (NRSV)

The Septuagint presents some differences.<sup>1</sup> Instead of a flint (צר), Zipporah uses a pebble (ψῆφος).

The main difference is in what happens after the actual circumcision. She falls at his feet rather than touching his foot. Then, the cryptic Hebrew expression reveals Zipporah’s relief: “The blood of my son’s circumcision has ceased.”<sup>2</sup>

### The Puzzle

That YHWH should attack Moses when he is doing precisely what YHWH ordered him to do—going back to Egypt to liberate his people—is a puzzle. Moreover, the object of the divine attack and the owner of the foot Zipporah touches are rendered four times by a third masculine pronoun (ויפגשהו, המיתו, רגליו, ממנו), which could equally refer to Moses or to his son, thus hindering the identification of the addressee of the formula “You are *hatan* of blood to me”. Zipporah repeats these words in verse 26, replacing ‘to me’ (לי) with ‘by circumcision’ (למולת). It seems that the words ‘*hatan* of blood by circumcision’ are presented as a traditional formula, probably pronounced in circumcision ceremonies, and this little episode ascribes the origin of the saying ‘*hatan* of bloods by circumcision’ to Moses’ wife. In so doing, the formula is anchored in Israel’s mythical past while Zipporah’s Midianite origins retain an ‘exotic’ flavour.

The ambiguity of Zipporah’s words has generated two main approaches: the endangered ancestor (Moses) or the endangered firstborn (Gershom).

---

<sup>1</sup>The Hebrew and Greek are compared in Figure 1 below.

<sup>2</sup>Andrew S. Jacobs, “Blood Will Out: Jesus’ Circumcision and Early Christian Readings of Exodus 4:24-26,” *Henoah* 30,2 (2008) 311–32 (316). Or “The blood of the circumcision of my child is staunched.” (NETS).

## Zipporah saves her husband

In pre-Standard Biblical Hebrew, בנה in verse 25 could be read either as ‘her son’ or ‘his son’, so it is possible to maintain Moses at centre-stage, even though in this episode he is entirely passive. To clarify the referent of the three singular masculine pronouns, ‘Moses’ was added as the subject of the first verb in verse 24 in the Syriac (“As Moses was on the way...”) or as the owner of the foot Zipporah touches in the NRSV (“she touched Moses’ feet”). Moses is thus portrayed as the endangered ancestor. Zipporah supposedly wards off a divine onslaught caused by the blood-guilt incurred by Moses, either due to the murder of an Egyptian taskmaster (Exod 2:12),<sup>3</sup> or for disobeying the command to circumcise his son on the eighth day (Gen 17:12; Lev 12:3).<sup>4</sup> Or the divine attack was meant to establish a parallel with Gen 32:26 where Jacob wrestles with a divine entity at the Jabbok ford on his return from Paddan-Aram.<sup>5</sup> The ‘Jacobization’ of Moses reflects the struggle between Jacob and Moses as ancestor figures evoked in Hos 12:12–13, but in Moses’ case there is no wrestling. Moses could well have been fast asleep and if anyone prevails at all in Exodus 4, it is Zipporah. Nevertheless, the figure of Moses is so central to the Exodus narrative that it is hard to imagine that Zipporah’s cryptic words are not addressed to Moses. Though *ḥatan* designates a relationship stemming from marriage broader than merely that of bridegroom, such as fathers-in-law (Exod 18:1), brothers-in-law (1 Sam 18:21), and sons-in-law,<sup>6</sup> the only potential addressees for Zipporah’s words are limited to Moses and their son. As it is hard to conceive that circumcision could turn Zipporah’s own son into, say, her son-in-law, Moses must indeed be Zipporah’s ‘bridegroom of blood’,<sup>7</sup> even though the one who bleeds in this episode is the son. How the mother’s smearing of her son’s blood onto Moses’ feet can turn Moses into a ‘bridegroom of blood’ is far from obvious, all the more so since the Hebrew word for blood here is twice in the plural (דמים). Another approach is to focus on the son rather than on the father.

## Zipporah saves her son

In the narrative as it is organized now, the divine attack comes immediately after the mention of the killing of Pharaoh’s firstborn son. As the word ‘son’ occurs three times in the previous verses,<sup>8</sup> the

3William H. Propp, “That Bloody Bridegroom (Exodus IV 24-6),” *Vetus Testamentum* 43 (1993) 495–518 argues that this passage marks the passage from pre-nuptial to neonatal circumcision. B. Embry, “The Endangerment of Moses: Towards a New Reading of Exodus 4:24-26,” *Vetus Testamentum* 60,2 (2010) 177–96 establishes a parallel between Zipporah and Balak ben Zippor in the story of Balaam in Exodus 22.

4Rainer Kessler, “Psychoanalytische Lektüre biblischer Texte - das Beispiel von Ex 4,24-26,” in Rainer Kessler, “Psychoanalytische Lektüre biblischer Texte – das Beispiel von Ex 4,24-26,” in *Gotteserndung. Beiträge zur Hermeneutik und Exegese der Hebräischen Bibel* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2006) 63–80.

5See Shamaryahu Talmon, “*Ḥātan dāmīm*,” *Eretz Israel* 3 (1954) 93–96.

6T.G. Mitchell, “The Meaning of the Noun *ḥtn* in the Old Testament,” *Vetus Testamentum* 19 (1969) 93–112.

7Hans-Friedemann Richter, “Gab es einen ‘Blutbräutigam’? Erwägungen zu Ex 4,24-26,” in *Studies in the Book of Exodus. Redaction - Reception – Interpretation*, edited by Marc Vervenne (Leuven: Peeters, 1996) 433–441 (438).

8‘Israel my first-born son’ in verse 22; ‘let my son go’ and ‘I will slay your first-born son’ in verse 23.

antecedent of most if not all of the third person singular pronouns in verses 24–26 should be the son as Moses is never named in these verses. Apart from YHWH in verse 24, the sole protagonists are Zipporah (מִמְנָה, verse 26 in the Samaritan Pentateuch) and her son (בְּנֵהָ, verse 25).

If the son is the target of the divine attack, his circumcision by Zipporah can be read against adolescent or pre-nuptial rites of passage. In this case, the circumcision of Moses' son by his foreign wife reveals her acknowledgement of the value of the Hebrew ritual, which is to be performed soon after birth rather than much later, as is attested in non-Hebrew traditions.<sup>9</sup>

Or the circumcision of Moses' son is meant to protect him from being confused with Egyptian firstborns who are supposedly circumcised later than Israelites.<sup>10</sup> If the son in question is Moses' firstborn, the angel of the Lord could take him for an Egyptian firstborn and kill him in the night of the tenth plague precisely because he is still uncircumcised (Exod 12:29).<sup>11</sup>

Hence, the son could be the one under attack.<sup>12</sup> This, however, hardly explains how circumcision makes Moses' son the *hatan* of his mother. This is exactly the quandary addressed by the symbolic circumcision presented now.

## A Symbolic Circumcision from Zimbabwe

A volume on the oral traditions of the Karanga, a people living in the Ndanga Reservation south-east of Fort Victoria, the capital of this province of Zimbabwe, has a section on circumcision.<sup>13</sup> The author was in charge of the Musito Hospital between 1965 and 1971 and collected most of the data from a group of nurses from a religious order who assisted him in the hospital.

The medical doctor realized that his patients approached disease very differently from his own understanding. For instance, they would not consider physical ailments apart from the spiritual realm of gods, ancestors and nature. Therefore, treatments administered by the white doctor were negated, their results misinterpreted and explanations misunderstood. For these reasons, the doctor decided to investigate the mental make-up of the people he was serving, focusing on their symbols

---

<sup>9</sup>In this case, Zipporah's act can be added to the dossier of the so-called Qenite hypothesis besides the institution of judges in Exod 18:13–27. See Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Midianite-Kenite Hypothesis Revisited and the Origins of Judah," *JSOT* 33 (2008) 131–58; J. E. Dunn, *A Land whose Stones are Iron and from whose Hills you may Mine Copper: Metallurgy, Pottery, and the Midianite-Qenite Hypothesis* (BA thesis prepared under the direction of Baruch Halpern at the University of California, Santa Barbara, 2011),

<[http://purl.galileo.usg.edu/uga\\_etd/dunn\\_jacob\\_e\\_201505\\_ma](http://purl.galileo.usg.edu/uga_etd/dunn_jacob_e_201505_ma)>.

<sup>10</sup>Nyasha Junior and Jeremy Schipper, "Mosaic Disability and identity in Exodus 4:10; 6:12, 30," *Biblical Interpretation* 16,5 (2008) 428–41 (436) quoting J. M. Sasson, "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," *JBL* 85 (1966) 473–76 (474).

<sup>11</sup>Adam J. Howell, "The firstborn son of Moses as the 'relative of blood' in Exodus 4.24-26," *JSOT* 35,1 (2010) 63–76.

<sup>12</sup>See for instance Howell, "Firstborn," 63–76, though Tertullian had already argued that it was the son who came under attack. See A. Le Boulluec, "Moïse menacé de mort. L'énigme d'Exode 4,24,26 d'après la Septante et selon les Pères," in *Lectures anciennes de la Bible* (Cahiers de Biblia Patristica 1; Strasbourg: Centre d'études patristiques, 1987) 75–104 (83).

<sup>13</sup>Herbert Aschwanden, *Symbols of Life* (Shona Heritage Series 3; Gweru/Harare/Nyanda: Mambo Press, 1982) translated by Ursula Cooper from the German *Symbole des Lebens* (Zürich: Atlantis, 1976).

of life.

The nurses reported an old rite which, in their days, was still performed only in the most remote areas. In short, “Within a few days, a new-born baby has to be circumcised symbolically, by his mother.” A first obvious parallel with the biblical story is the mother who circumcises her son:

Holding the child on her lap, she collects some of the bloody discharge which since the baby’s birth exudes from her vagina. With the other hand she pushes back the foreskin of the boy’s penis as far as possible and then smears the liquid over the exposed penis. She then gently moves the foreskin back and forth a few times, trying to loosen the physiological adhesion between foreskin and the glans penis.<sup>14</sup>

Secrecy presents a second parallel since Exod 4:24 indicates that the scene occurred at night behind closed doors when Moses is so little involved that he could have been fast asleep. The manipulation of the child’s penis establishes a third parallel since the foot (רגל) in verse 25 is a common euphemism for the male organ in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>15</sup>

The Karanga elders argued that this symbolic circumcision is a substitute for surgical circumcision, which had been given up altogether long before “because too many children die as a result of the operation.”<sup>16</sup> The report does not state when circumcision was abandoned and there is no evidence that the Karanga ever practised surgical circumcision, which is why “neighbouring tribes scornfully call them ‘the dirty ones’. By dirty they mean the collection of glandular discharge under the foreskin.”<sup>17</sup> The parallel with the biblical ‘uncircumcised’ is obvious (Gen 34:14; Exod 12:48; Judg 14:3; 15:18; 1 Sam 14:6; 17:26.36; 2 Sam 1:20; 1 Chron 10:4).

This ‘symbolic’ circumcision is not merely symbolic. It involves the manipulation of the foreskin to avert phimosis and infertility, a common condition among the Karanga, while avoiding the hazards of circumcision. The question is why blood has to be smeared on the glans.

The main novelty provided by the Karanga rite is that the blood in question is the mother’s, and not the uncircumcised son’s. Lubricating the glans makes some sense even from a modern medical point of view, but why use blood and why the mother’s?

On this point, the Karanga were adamant. Only the blood from the vaginal discharges of the mother could do. Blood from the mother’s finger or from any other part of her body would be tantamount to adultery.<sup>18</sup> As in adultery, a mother ‘mixes different blood’—i.e., semen from her husband and from her paramour—smearing the glans of her child with blood other than that which is flowing from her uterus would be ‘mixing bloods’. Puerperal blood, which flows from the uterus after

---

<sup>14</sup>Aschwanden, *Symbols*, p. 35.

<sup>15</sup>Deut 28:57; Judg 3:24; 1 Sam 24:4; 2 Kgs 18:27; Isa 6:2; 7:20; 36:12; Ezek 16:25. See S. Schorch, *Euphemismen in der Hebräischen Bibel* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000) 222.

<sup>16</sup>Aschwanden, *Symbols*, p. 35–36.

<sup>17</sup>Aschwanden, *Symbols*, p. 36.

<sup>18</sup>Aschwanden, *Symbols*, p. 37.

parturition, is the only safe lubricant for the child's glans because, in Karanga thinking, it is of a different nature from the mother's blood, including her menstruation blood.<sup>19</sup> The mother's puerperal blood is a mixture of the father's and mother's blood, exactly like the child himself. Only in the secret ceremony of symbolic circumcision is the mother allowed to touch this mixed blood and use it on her child's penis in order to safeguard his fertility because both his hereditary sides are present as witnesses.<sup>20</sup>

Is it legitimate to read a biblical text in light of a modern African rite?

## Relevance of Modern African Circumcision

Reading Exod 4:24–26 in light of a near-extinct rite from Zimbabwe implies a two-and-a-half to three millennia temporal gap and quite a considerable geographical gap. The twentieth century saw discussions of the relevance of Sub-Saharan African cultures for the study of the Hebrew scriptures, first as a search for common origins and then simply for similarities.<sup>21</sup> Recently, a South Africa thesis on the story of Hannah used feedback from questionnaires and face-to-face interviews of the Karanga, the same people of Zimbabwe as the ones referred to here for Zipporah.<sup>22</sup> Then, this field was broadened to the study of all cases of barrenness in the Hebrew Bible on the basis of proverbs and practices of traditional Akan society in Ghana.<sup>23</sup> As such, these studies do not necessarily justify the use of African ethnographic material in biblical exegesis, but at least they show that it is no new endeavour.

The proximity of the Arabian peninsula with the African coast and with Egypt—of obvious relevance in the context of the Hebrew Bible—reduces the geographical gap between Midian and Zimbabwe and renders the geographical gap less problematic than the two to three-millennia temporal gap between the Zipporah episode and the Karanga. Such a time gap is less of a hurdle considering that many if not most human cultures have been and continue to be confronted with phimosis, which is one reason why circumcision is widely attested across cultures and eras, even today among Christians, despite the Apostle Paul's repeated objections to it (Romans 2; 1 Cor 7:18–19; Gal 5:2–6). If phimosis and the dangers inherent to circumcision are universal issues, the relevance of the Zimbabwean rite for Exod 4:24–26 cannot be dismissed out of hand, though such

---

19Aschwanden, *Symbols*, p. 37. In the same 'vein', Serge Frolov, "The hero as bloody bridegroom: On the meaning and origin of Exodus 4,26," *Biblica* 77,4 (1996) 520–23 (520) notes that the plural of 'bloods' in *h̄tn d̄mym* "could have different meanings, describing, *inter alia*, the blood of childbirth and menstruation".

20Aschwanden, *Symbols*, p. 38. The belief that circumcision fosters fertility is also attested among modern-day Filipinos. See Athena E. Gorospe, *Narrative and Identity. An Ethical Reading of Exodus 4* (Leiden: Brill, 2007) 118.

21See E. Isaac, "Relations between the Hebrew Bible and Africa," *Jewish Social Studies* 26 (1964) 87–98. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/4466067](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4466067). R. Patai, "The Ritual Approach to Hebrew-African Culture Contact," *Jewish Social Studies* 24 (1962) 86–96. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/4465916](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4465916).

22C. Moyo, *A Karanga Perspective on Fertility and Barrenness as Blessing and Curse in 1 Samuel 1:1–2:10* (D.Th. Thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 2006).

23J. P. Ewurama De-Whyte, *A Cultural-Narrative Reading of the Hebrew Bible Barrenness Narratives* (Leiden: Brill, 2018)

an approach requires the handling of the parallels with care.

The danger of a comparative approach is to be satisfied with the juxtaposition of apparent similarities. The comparison in itself is only useful inasmuch as it raises particular issues.<sup>24</sup> In this case, equating blood and lineage, the Karanga rite directs the exegete's gaze on Zipporah and her status vis-à-vis her son.

## Septuagint: Healing the Haemorrhage

The bearing of the Karanga symbolic circumcision on Exod 4:25–26 is that Moses is in no way involved in Zipporah's acts. The circumcision she performs is the most graphic description of the operation in the Hebrew Bible, with the verb כרת rather than מול used elsewhere for circumcision in general. Exodus 4:25 is the only passage where כרת is applied to 'prepuce' (ערלה), whereas Gen 17:14 uses כרת for the removal (literally 'cutting off') of the uncircumcised from the covenantal people.

Zipporah's next move, however, is as cryptic as the previous one is clear: she touches, strikes or reaches out for "his leg", either Moses', her son's or even YHWH's. The Alexandrian translators seem to have opted for the latter option (Figure 1).

	ΕΞΟΔΟΣ 4	New English Translation of the Septuagint
25a	καὶ λαβοῦσα Σεπφωρα ψῆφον	And Sephora took a pebble
25b	περιέτεμεν τὴν ἀκροβυστίαν τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτῆς	and circumcised the foreskin of her son,
25c	καὶ προσέπεσεν πρὸς τοὺς πόδας	and she fell at his feet,
25d	καὶ εἶπεν Ἔστη τὸ αἷμα τῆς περιτομῆς τοῦ παιδίου μου.	and said, "The blood of the circumcision of my child is staunched."
26a	καὶ ἀπῆλθεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ	And he went away from him,
26b	Διότι εἶπεν Ἔστη τὸ αἷμα τῆς περιτομῆς τοῦ παιδίου μου.	because she said, "the blood of the circumcision of my child is staunched."

Figure 1: Exodus 4:25-26 in the Septuagint and the NETS

Instead of reaching out, Zipporah falls at someone's feet and the *hatan* of bloods formula becomes a cry of relief or of victory: "The blood of the circumcision of my son has stopped!" Instead of dying of haemorrhage, the child has survived the ordeal. In this sense, falling at the divine attacker's feet (πόδας, plural) is an entreaty, begging the attacker to spare her child. Then, the translators rendered מננו וירך in 26a as ἀπῆλθεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ. The question is who is the subject? The common understanding is that these words signal the departure of the divine attacker: YHWH let him alone or went away (NETS). Other options are possible. The Greek translators could have read וירך from

<sup>24</sup>I warmly thank T. R. Blanton IV for his pointed feedback on earlier drafts of the paper presented at the *Phallus in all its Glory* colloquium in Fribourg on October 11, 2018.

the root רפא with final *aleph* ‘to heal’ rather than from רפה with final *heh*, because the way they rendered the *hatan* of bloods formula uses the verb ἵστημι attested in medical treatises in the sense of stopping a flux—diarrhea or haemorrhage, as is also the case in Luke 8:44.<sup>25</sup> Hence, instead of the divine attacker who departs, ἀπῆλθεν ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ can refer to the blood: it stopped from the circumcised penis. In this case, Zipporah’s fall is an act of prostration at YHWH’s feet and her words are a prayer: ‘May the blood of the circumcision of my son stop flowing’.

### Samaritan: Healing Phimosi

This understanding of the Greek version leads to reconsider the common rendering of verses 25c and 26a in the Hebrew (Figure 2). In verse 25c (ותגע לרגליו), the preposition in front of ‘his foot’ (לרגליו) can be taken as indicating the indirect object. Instead of “she touched Moses’ feet with it” (NRSV), she reaches out for her son’s penis (רגל) from which she has just severed the foreskin (ערלה). The various meanings of the root נגע open a range of actual haemostatic procedures, from a magical touch to a hard squeeze.<sup>26</sup> The graphic description of Zipporah’s nurse-like attempt to halt the bleeding from her son’s circumcised penis can be viewed as a continuation of the surgical description of circumcision in verse 25ab.

In this case, the modern renderings of וירף ממנו in verse 26a can be challenged because they tend to ignore ממנו and read וירפהו: “He let him alone.” (NRSV). Instead of taking וירף as a *hiphil* of רפה and choosing YHWH as its subject, the verb רפה can be taken in its primary meaning of “to release, to loosen”.<sup>27</sup> Instead of YHWH, the subject of וירף is the object of ותגע in verse 25c, i.e., his

25F. Montanari, *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek* (Leiden: Brill, 2015) 990 quoting the first century CE pharmacologist Dioscorides 2.1.20 (ed. M. Wellmann; Berlin 1907–1914) and fourth century CE medical writer Oribasius 4.10.1 (in *Corpus Medicorum Graecorum*, Leipzig 1908). Hans Kosmala, ‘The Bloody Husband’, *Vetus Testamentum* 12 (1962) 14–28 (28) favours a more magical approach whereas the mere sight of the blood is enough to placate the attack. Instead of expressing ‘ceasing’ or ‘being staunched’—the verb ἵσταναι is used “as a more emphatic word for εἶναι, ‘to exist’, ‘to be present’, ‘to be there’, and very often presupposes visual perception.” See also G. Vermes, “Circumcision and Exodus IV 24–26: Prelude to the Theology of Baptism,” in *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1973) 179–192; K.S. Winslow, *Early Jewish and Christian Memories of Moses’ Wives: Exogamist Marriage and Ethnic Identity* (Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 66; Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2005) 45–55, 127–45, 227–57, 305–67.

26 נגע *hif’il* can have the sense of pushing, applying pressure. See הגיע לארץ ‘to hurl’ or ‘cast down’ fortifications (Isa 25:12) or a kingdom (Lam 2:2) to the ground (HALOT 2.669). Wolfgang Hüllstrung, “Wer versuchte wen zu töten? Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis von Exodus 4,24–26,” in *Die Dämonen. Die Dämonologie der israelitisch-jüdischen und frühchristlichen Literatur im Kontext ihrer Umwelt. Demons. The demonology of Israelite-Jewish and early Christian literature in context of their environment* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003) 182–196 (186) reads the scene in light of blood magic.

27 HALOT 3.1276–77. Note that the Masoretes maintained the *qal* with *wayiraf* instead of *wayaref*.

foot (רגליו). Instead of reading ממנו as a direct object referring to the son, it is an indirect object referring to what was released by the severance of the foreskin, i.e., the glans. Hence, as much as the Karanga mother pulls back the foreskin to release the glans, the phrase וירף ממנו states the outcome of circumcision, whereas the Septuagint points out the risk of haemorrhage it entails. On the basis of ממנה in the Samaritan Pentateuch, the indirect object of וירף can be a feminine noun, i.e., ערלה in verse 25b. Thanks to circumcision, the penis was released from the foreskin.

	שמות 4	New Revised Standard Version
25a	ותקח צפרה צר	But Zipporah took a flint
25b	ותכרת את ערלת בנה	and cut off her son's foreskin,
25c	ותגע לרגליו	and touched <i>Moses' feet with it</i> ,
25d	ותאמר כי חתן דמים אתה לי	and said, "Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!"
26a	וירף ממנו <sup>28</sup>	So he let him alone.
26b	אז אמרה חתן דמים למולת	It was then that she said, "A bridegroom of blood by circumcision."

Figure 2: Exodus 4:25-26 in the Hebrew and the NRSV

This physiological reading finds support in the word צר in verse 25a. In a non-vocalized text, צר could be read as צר 'constriction' rather than as צר, 'flint'. In this case, focusing on the tight foreskin rather than on the cutting tool, verse 25ab reads "Zipporah took [the] constriction and cut the foreskin of her son. After the first *hatan*-of-bloods formula, verse 26 adds: "So the glans was loose from the foreskin, hence she said 'A *hatan* of bloods by circumcision.'"

Before dealing with verse 25cd, an objection should be considered. If it is the son's glans which Zipporah released, there is nothing left in the text to explain that the divine attack was placated. This is no hurdle in itself since it is exactly what we have in the Septuagint where the stoppage of the haemorrhage implies the failure of the divine attack. In the reading proposed here, the loosening of the glans plays the same role as the stoppage of the haemorrhage in the Septuagint, making any explicit reference to the departure of the attacker unnecessary.

### Puerperal Blood?

The next issue is whether or not the Zipporah episode involves puerperal blood as is the case in the Karanga rite. There is no clue at that stage in the Exodus story that Zipporah would have had any puerperal blood to smear onto her son's penis. Exodus 2:23 posits many days between the birth of Gershom and the death of the king of Egypt, the event that made Moses' return safe. According to

<sup>28</sup>Or ממנה in the Samaritan Pentateuch.

the chronology of the final form of the Moses story, Zipporah would have no more blood flowing out of her uterus to smear onto Gershom's penis. This is no hurdle if the chronology has been worked out later than the *hatan dāmy* episode, but there is no need here to postulate any date for this episode.

Athena Gorospe discusses the matter of post-partum uncleanness and reads the circumcision of Zipporah's son as closing "the mother's initial period of impurity."<sup>29</sup> This is insufficient to confirm a parallel with the Karanga symbolic circumcision, except that the Karanga agree with Leviticus over the difference between puerperal blood and the mother's own blood. For the Karanga, puerperal blood is similar to the blood of the child, a mixture of the maternal and paternal bloods. For Leviticus, the nature of puerperal blood depends on the sex of the child, the birth of a son being less polluting than the birth of a girl. Leviticus also uses the plural form of *dam* for vaginal blood associated with childbirth or menstruation (Lev 12:4–7; 20:18). The difference between the mother's own blood and puerperal blood flowing from her warns against using modern categories to interpret Exod 4:24–26. The main bearings of the Karanga symbolic circumcision on this text is the meaning of blood as indicator of lineage.

### ***Hatan* of Bloods as Symbolic Registration into the Paternal Lineage**

The Karanga symbolic circumcision reveals a meaning of biblical circumcision, which has been overshadowed when circumcision became a sign of the *berit* (Genesis 15–17). The Karanga ritual provides the missing rationale for Zipporah's acts and words. Her second act involves some kind of manipulation (נגע) of her son's bleeding penis. Even more significantly, the blood the Karanga mother rubs onto her son's penis recovers the missing link between the biblical *hatan* and the *damym*, a link twice stated by Zipporah. Once circumcised, the son becomes, in English parlance, his mother's son-in-law, a notion which defies modern logic. In biblical parlance, however, a son who become his mother's son-in-law means that he enters his paternal lineage.

The Zipporah episode implies a two-stage process for the aggregation of a son to his paternal lineage. The birth removes the child physically from his mother's body. Circumcision marks the second stage. According to the Karangas, using blood flowing from the mother's veins to accomplish their symbolic circumcision would do the exact opposite. It would tie back the son to his mother's lineage, and annihilate the first stage of separation effected by birthing. This son would literally become a mummy's boy, a bond even moderns might consider a threat to his future virility. Whether or not the Karanga taboo on 'mixing bloods' exists in the Hebrew Bible, the Karanga symbolic circumcision provides a key to the 'bloods' (דמים) in Exod 4:25–26. Now vocalized as a

---

<sup>29</sup>Gorospe, *Narrative*, 221.

plural form, דמים could have been a dual form in a pre-Masoretic text, *damaym* instead of *damym*.

## Conclusion

Who is attacked and why is not answered here. It is possible that the divine attack served to graft the episode into the Mosaic story in order to establish a parallel with the figure of Jacob. What is answered here are the *damym* or *damaym*, the bloods, which flow at birth and at circumcision, In Zipporah's mouth these bloods refer to the two occasions when blood must flow in order to turn a boy into his father's son. Whereas the Karanga focus on puerperal blood, Exodus 4 only implies this first blood. The second blood is the blood of circumcision. It marks the second and final stage of the symbolic registration of the newborn son into his paternal lineage. Contrary to the Karanga bloodless circumcision, in Exodus 4 it is the boy's own blood which flows. With this second blood, the circumcised son is no more a blood relative of his mother. Hence, the double *hatan damym* or *hatan damaym* formula only makes sense from the mother's mouth. The son becomes an in-law or a marriage relative to his own mother as much as the other members of her husband's lineage. Hence, the Karanga rite provides the linguistic argument to associate the bloods of parturition and circumcision with lineage.

Whereas the Septuagint focuses on the stoppage of that blood, the Hebrew text underlines the meaning of the son's circumcision as the final step of the aggregation of a son to his paternal lineage. The graphic description of the removal of the foreskin and the loosening of the glans in Exod 4:25–26 marks the circumcised son as saved from phimosis and thus fit to enter and eventually perpetuate the paternal lineage.

To recapitulate, a new rendering of Exod 4:24–26 can be proposed for the Hebrew:

	שמות 4	
24ab	ויהי בדרך במלון ויפגשהו יהוה	On the way at the nightly stop over, YHWH attacked him.
24c	ויבקש המיתו	He requested <sup>30</sup> his death.
25a	ותקח צפורה צר	Zipporah took [the] constriction
25b	ותכרת את ערלת בנה	and cut off her son's foreskin.
25c	ותגע לרגליו	She reached for/compressed his penis,
25d	ותאמר כי חתן דמים אתה לי	and declared, "now you are a relative of bloods to me!"
26a	אז ירף ממנו <sup>31</sup>	He let him alone/It was loose from it.
26b	אז אמרה חתן דמים למולת	Hence she had declared, "A relative of bloods by circumcision."

Figure 3: An alternative rendering of the Hebrew and Samaritan text of Exodus 4:24-26

<sup>30</sup>בקש in the sense of blood revenge 2 Sam 4:11.

<sup>31</sup>Or ממנה in the Samaritan Pentateuch.

An alternative translation of the Septuagint can also be suggested:

	ΕΞΟΔΟΣ 4	
24a	Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ ἐν τῷ καταλύματι	It happened on the way at the inn
24b	συνήντησεν αὐτῷ ἄγγελος κυρίου	an angel of the Lord met him
24c	καὶ ἐζήτει αὐτὸν ἀποκτεῖναι.	and was seeking to kill him.
25a	καὶ λαβοῦσα Σεπφωρα ψῆφον	And Sepphora took a pebble
25b	περιέτεμεν τὴν ἀκροβυστίαν τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτῆς	and circumcised the foreskin of her son,
25c	καὶ προσέπεσεν πρὸς τοὺς πόδας	and she fell at his [the angel's] feet,
25d	καὶ εἶπεν Ἔστη τὸ αἷμα τῆς περιτομῆς τοῦ παιδίου μου.	and said, "The blood of the circumcision of my child is staunched."
26a	καὶ ἀπῆλθεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ	And it [the blood] stopped from it [the circumcised penis],
26b	Διότι εἶπεν Ἔστη τὸ αἷμα τῆς περιτομῆς τοῦ παιδίου μου.	because she said, "the blood of the circumcision of my child is staunched."

*Figure 4: Alternative rendering of Exodus 4:24-26 in the Septuagint*